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## Country note**

## Panama

*Summary*

The Executive Director presents the country note for Panama for a programme of cooperation for the period 2002 to 2006.

## The situation of children and women

1. Panama has a population of 2.8 million, 37 per cent of whom live below the poverty line. Children and adolescents constitute 49 per cent of the total poor, despite being only 38 per cent of the total population. Poverty affects 15 per cent of the urban population, 65 per cent of rural communities and 95 per cent of all indigenous groups. In a country with a per capita gross national product of $3,060, this ongoing poverty is explained by a highly skewed income distribution. According to 1997 figures, the wealthiest 20 per cent of the population receive 40 times more income than the poorest 20 per cent, a major obstacle to the fulfilment of children's rights. The armed conflict in Colombia creates an additional risk of sudden population displacement, which may severely tax existing basic social services in cities along the southern border.

2. Social development is a priority in Panama, with almost 40 per cent of the public budget and 18 per cent of gross domestic product committed to social sector public institutions. As a result, the infant mortality rate (IMR) and under-five

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** An addendum to the present report containing the final country programme recommendation will be submitted to the Executive Board for approval at its second regular session of 2001.

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mortality rate (U5MR) are among the lowest in the Americas and the Caribbean region, 19 and 24 per 1,000 live births, respectively. Other goals of the World Summit for Children — in areas of immunization coverage, safe water, safe excreta disposal, use of oral rehydration therapy, adult literacy and basic education — have been achieved.

3. Poverty and exclusion continue, however, particularly among marginalized groups. Nationwide coverage of early childhood care and pre-school education is low. Less than 31 per cent of children 4 to 6 years of age are enrolled in pre-school, and despite a 93.7 per cent net primary school enrolment, 3 out of 10 children do not finish primary school. Inequalities are highest among the indigenous and rural populations, and especially for children with disabilities. IMR for these populations is twice the national average and the maternal mortality rate, estimated at 70 per 100,000 lives births, is 7 times higher.

4. Social exclusion has a serious impact on children and families, as reflected in high levels of child labour, family disintegration and violence. Early pregnancy, drug consumption and adolescent involvement in illegal activities are other growing concerns. At least 8 per cent of children between the ages of 8 and 14 seek work to augment family income. Exclusion is exacerbated by a lack of participatory mechanisms for children and adolescents, preventing them from experiencing and valuing their right to express their views and opinions. Women remain vulnerable to gender discrimination, as is evidenced in salary levels, employment practices and lack of political representation. This is especially significant, as recent studies show that 30 per cent of all households are headed by women, and the trend is increasing.

5. Another emerging issue is the perinatal transmission of HIV/AIDS, which has increased from no reported cases in 1990 to 24 cases in 1999. Increased rates have been observed in the 0-4 and 15-24 age groups. While incidence is still higher among adult men, there is growing incidence among adolescents and young women.

6. In response to these concerns, the Government is developing policies to increase efficiency in public expenditure, to break the vicious circle of poverty and exclusion, and to guarantee the respect for child and adolescent rights. Actions include legislative and institutional reforms in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, improved institutional coordination, and decentralization of programmes. These legal and institutional reforms will foster more effective programmes. This will also encourage more efficient use of financial resources, which is particularly important, as the amount of unspent social sector resources is increasing.

7. Panamanian society is emerging as a key player in the fulfilment of child rights. Civil society organizations have developed networks to advocate and ensure that children's rights are respected and fulfilled. As yet, however, the moral voice of such organizations has not been strong enough to counteract existing social practices. Nevertheless, this coordinated movement for children can contribute to the New Global Agenda for Children. Panama has yet to present its second report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, but recommendations from the first report were instrumental in promoting legislative changes in juvenile justice and gender opportunities. However, the lack of a comprehensive Children's Code continues to be a major obstacle for the formulation of long-term public policies and the creation of inter-institutional coordination mechanisms.

8. While the political and social will to reduce poverty and exclusion exists, the challenge remains to extend activities to more marginalized areas and ensure that they are adequately financed and implemented by motivated and strengthened social institutions, communities and families. This requires further decentralization and de-concentration of existing services, and heightened monitoring of actions by civil society.

## Lessons learned from past cooperation

9. The 1999 mid-term review (MTR) highlighted several important achievements of the current programme, such as the approval and ratification of the Juvenile Justice Law, the creation of a national committee for monitoring the rights of children, and the institutionalization of the out-of-school youth programme. Service delivery, although not an explicit strategy of the country programme, has played an important role in mobilizing local resources to increase service coverage for indigenous populations.

10. Although country programme objectives were found to be relevant and appropriate, the MTR determined that sustainability of programme interventions was not assured due to the lack of an overall social development plan and a rights-based and institutional framework. This prevents the institutionalization of programmes, and sustains a less than optimal sectoral approach. Furthermore, administrative and institutional structures need to be adapted and reinforced for an effective application of the recently approved laws. Uncoordinated sectoral interventions in turn have created a duplication of efforts, thus reducing the cost-effectiveness of programmes and projects. The MTR recommended that the future country programme be tightly linked to policies with a rights and gender focus, designed to promote inter-institutional interventions. The absence of a mechanism to monitor goals, programmes and projects was also highlighted.

11. The MTR further recommended the creation of strategic alliances for children's rights to reinforce advocacy and social communication and coordinate national efforts, both governmental and non-governmental, to break the cycle of exclusion and poverty. Civil society organizations, particularly the media, have a crucial role to play in the permanent and independent monitoring of child rights. Furthermore, information must reach those families where violence and child abuse exist. This empowerment must also result in family demand for the fulfilment of child rights and better and more accessible social services.

12. At minimal financial cost, UNICEF, through the country programme, was able to fulfil the role of principal advocate for child rights, serve as a source of knowledge and technical advice, and provide a non-partisan space for political debate. Successful projects in institutional reform, decentralization of social services, skills training for adolescents and reduction of child labour will be replicated in other localities.

## Proposed country programme strategy

13. UNICEF will serve as a knowledge hub, working closely with national and international counterparts (bilateral and multilateral) in order to provide information

and cutting-edge know-how on the situation of child rights, and advice on policies, legal and institutional reform and best practices. Because of its credibility as an ethical and moral voice, it will also serve as a social alliance builder that networks with civil society, government and international leaders.

14. The strategic framework of the new country programme is founded on the universal, sustainable realization of child, adolescent and women's rights. It will operate within the national social policy framework, supporting government efforts to reduce poverty and exclusion; promote wider access to social services; and foster community participation and decentralization. The strategy reflects UNICEF priorities as identified in the New Global Agenda for Children. The programme strategy was developed working with government counterparts and other development partners.

15. Key objectives of the country programme are: (a) promotion of legal-institutional reforms and social policy initiatives to eliminate discrimination and fulfil the rights of children, adolescents and women; (b) development of sustainable, community-based protection systems aimed at including the socially excluded, with particular attention to the education and participation of adolescents from poor urban, rural and indigenous communities; (c) promotion and support of an independent and permanent social monitoring system for child rights; and (d) fostering of broad social alliances in support of a new vision for children and child rights.

16. The two main country programme strategies are: (a) capacity-building of national and local government institutions; and (b) the empowerment of children, adolescents and families. More specifically, the country programme will work to enhance national and local capacity in legal and institutional reform and policy design, and establish local child rights protection systems. Improved vertical integration will be sought by providing national policy makers with information on experiences and lessons learned from successful initiatives at the local level, and by encouraging adoption and scaling up of best practices. Empowerment will be based on the development of permanent monitoring systems as a basis for informed social demand for the fulfilment of child rights. Adolescent participation will be actively sought in this regard. A network of broad social alliances will foster social demand for children's rights. In addition, the programme will promote active involvement of a broad range of partners, so they can become part of the Global Movement for Children.

17. Two programmes have been identified. The *institutional development for the sustainable fulfilment of child rights programme* will seek to: (a) promote the approval and application of a comprehensive law for the protection of child and adolescent rights, as well as the Municipal Decentralization Law; (b) support social policies aimed at including those excluded from basic social services, particularly adolescents and indigenous communities; and (c) establish community-based child rights protection systems in priority municipalities, where there is a high level of social exclusion of children, adolescents and women. At the national level, the programme will promote a new legal and institutional framework, which will enforce an inter-institutional approach to children and adolescents as citizens with rights. At the local level, the new legal framework will allow municipalities and local organizations to promote and monitor the fulfilment of children's and women's

rights, giving local groups a decisive influence in access to and quality of social services.

18. The *social monitoring and alliances in favour of child rights programme* will aim to: (a) establish an independent and permanent monitoring system for child, adolescent and women's rights; and (b) foster broad social alliances and informed social participation in defending and promoting child rights, particularly giving a voice to children and adolescents so that they can express their views and opinions. This endeavour, while enhancing social demand for child rights, will be key to ensuring that both government programmes and citizen's views and practices are more respectful of children as persons with rights.

19. The Common Country Assessment, with its focus on the fight against poverty and exclusion, provides a programmatic vision for the preparation of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework, which will foster the respect of all human rights for all Panamanians, and create thematic groups on adolescent issues, HIV/AIDS, gender, emergency preparedness and municipal development. Cross-sectoral costs will be used for administrative support, as well as programme monitoring and evaluation costs.

## Estimated programme budget

**Estimated programme of cooperation, 2002-2006***

(In thousands of United States dollars)

| | Regular resources | Other resources | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Institutional development for the sustainable fulfilment of child rights | 750 | 1 000 | 1 750 |
| Social monitoring and alliances in favour of child rights | 270 | 850 | 1 120 |
| Cross-sectoral costs | 480 | 400 | 880 |
| **Total** | **1 500** | **2 250** | **3 750** |

* These are indicative figures only which are subject to change once aggregate financial data are finalized.